



The Turkish Presidential Elections of 10 August 2014

Ioannis N. Grigoriadis

To cite this article: Ioannis N. Grigoriadis (2015) The Turkish Presidential Elections of 10 August 2014, *Mediterranean Politics*, 20:1, 105-110, DOI: [10.1080/13629395.2014.997430](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2014.997430)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2014.997430>



Published online: 10 Mar 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 389



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

The Turkish Presidential Elections of 10 August 2014

IOANNIS N. GRIGORIADIS

Department of Political Science & Public Administration, Bilkent University, Bilkent, Ankara, Turkey

ABSTRACT *The Turkish presidential elections of 10 August 2014 were the first direct elections in the history of republican Turkey. The election of prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the first round illustrated his dominant position in Turkish politics, as well as the inability of opposition parties to provide an alternative candidate who appealed to the Turkish electorate. Growing social polarization and concern about emerging autocratic tendencies, corruption allegations and the multilevel crisis in the Middle East failed to dissuade Turkish voters. Nevertheless, the fulfilment of Erdoğan's declared intention of introducing presidentialism in Turkey will depend on the result of the upcoming parliamentary elections, to be held in June 2015 at the latest.*

Introduction

Presidential elections were held in Turkey on 10 August 2014 and led to the election of prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. This was the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey that the people were called to directly elect the head of state in an open and competitive election. Until the 2007 constitutional amendment, the president was elected by the Turkish Grand National Assembly with qualified majority and for a seven-year tenure. The former president Abdullah Gül was the last to be elected in this way. According to the new system, the president is elected for a period of five years by popular vote; but there was no major overhaul of his powers.

A Landslide Victory for Prime Minister Erdoğan

Three candidates were presented in this historic election. Following months of speculation about his intentions, the country's prime minister, founding president of the incumbent Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) and towering figure of Turkish politics in the last decade, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, became the AKP's candidate. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, a university professor and former

*Correspondence Address: Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, Department of Political Science & Public Administration, Bilkent University, Room T-364, Bilkent, Ankara TR-06800, Turkey. Email: ioannis@bilkent.edu.tr

Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), was the second candidate, endorsed by the two biggest opposition parties, the Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* – CHP) and the Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi* – MHP). Selahattin Demirtaş, a member of the Turkish parliament, former mayor of Diyarbakır and leading political figure of Turkey's Kurdish minority, was the third. He was supported by the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi* – HDP). The election campaign took place in a polarized political environment for a number of reasons.

First, the secularist segment of Turkish society was getting increasingly unsettled by the growing authoritarian tendencies of the Erdoğan administration, in particular following the June 2013 Gezi events and government limitations on access to the internet. The political situation became more tense in December 2013, when a major corruption investigation broke out, involving four government ministers and reaching up to the prime minister and his family. This led to an all-out war between prime minister Erdoğan and prominent Islamic cleric Fethullah Gülen and his religious movement, as well as blatant government interventions against the independence of the judiciary. Last but not least, the situation in Iraq and Syria had a bearing on political developments: 49 Turkish citizens were held hostage throughout the presidential election campaign in Turkey's General Consulate in Mosul by 'Islamic State' militants. These were eventually released after the election in an apparent swap deal of 'Islamic State' detainees. Turkish policies towards Syria and Iraq – in particular in relation to 'Islamic State', Iraqi and Syrian Kurdish groups – had a strong bearing on Turkey's own Kurdish question. Despite all these factors, the AKP had performed rather well in the March 2014 local elections, in which it was able again to secure a comfortable majority, as well as maintain its control of the country's two biggest metropolitan municipalities, Istanbul and Ankara. This proved a rather auspicious signal for the electoral fortunes of the AKP and prime minister Erdoğan.

The electoral campaign focused on the topics chosen by prime minister Erdoğan. His personal charisma, as well as government influence on the mass media contributed to the framing of the campaign according to his preferences. In November 2014, TRT Türk, one of the channels of Turkish national broadcaster TRT, was sentenced by the Higher Radio Television Council for violating the principle of impartiality: Between 6 and 8 August 2014, 5 hours 26 minutes of television time were allocated to Erdoğan and no time to the other two presidential candidates.

In his speeches, Erdoğan highlighted the achievements of his 11-year rule as prime minister, as well as his vision of a 'strong' and 'new' Turkey. According to him, this Turkey would rise to the challenges of globalization and gain a key position in global politics and economics by 2023, the centennial year of the Republic. Against this backdrop, Erdoğan warned that Turkey's enemies fought against him within and outside the country and pointed to the December 2012 corruption investigation as a 'sinister plot' of the 'parallel state.' Under this term, the Turkish prime minister and presidential candidate referred to the Gülen religious movement, a former key ally which had suddenly turned into an arch-enemy. Defending Turkey and its accomplishments against its external enemies and their domestic accomplices emerged as a key discourse item of the Erdoğan campaign.

One of the most important issues that Erdoğan raised during his campaign was the introduction of a presidential system through a profound constitutional amendment. The discussion about a far-reaching constitutional reform was not a new one. It dates back to 2007, when prime minister Erdoğan, amidst his confrontation with Turkey's military, promised a new civilian, democratic constitution as a remedy for further military interventions into politics and for the limited and non-comprehensive constitutional protection of human rights. While a constitutional reform was approved by referendum in 2010, it appeared to be far less ambitious than expected and desired. As the AKP and prime minister Erdoğan were able to effectively end the military tutelage over Turkish politics, the debate on constitutional reform abated and eventually shifted. The need for a new constitution was not denied by Erdoğan and his party. Nevertheless, instead of democratic consolidation and better protection of human rights and liberties, the key element of constitutional reform for the AKP was meant to be the introduction of a presidential system that would befit the preferences and ambitions of the AKP administration. The latter and Erdoğan himself had repeatedly voiced their view that the parliamentary system does not suit Turkish political culture and needs, as well as their determination to introduce a presidential system. While many thought that the French or the US model served as sources of inspiration, it appeared from the study of party publications and public statements on this matter that Latin American presidential models would probably be closer to the model desired by the AKP.

Opinion polls throughout the presidential election campaign predicted that prime minister Erdoğan could win more than 50 per cent of the vote and make a second round unnecessary. In the end, Erdoğan won 51.79 per cent and 21,000,143 votes. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, the joint candidate of the CHP and MHP, got 38.44 per cent of the vote and 15,587,720 votes. Selahattin Demirtaş, the third candidate, supported by the HDP, obtained 9.76 per cent and 3,958,048 votes. The voter turnout was 74.13 per cent. Even though the 51.8 per cent which prime minister Erdoğan won was lower than the predictions of opinion polls, which had given an estimate of 55–60 per cent, this was still a major personal success for the Turkish prime minister. This victory was achieved against the backdrop of growing social polarization, major corruption allegations that shook the government and temporarily gave the impression that the future of the AKP administration lay at stake, as well as the escalation of conflicts in the Middle East. The majority of Turkish voters seemed adamant in support for Erdoğan and indifferent to the deterioration of the government's human rights record, serious corruption allegations, as well as the various foreign policy crises. It rather paid attention to concerns that the potential departure of Erdoğan and his party could destabilize the economy and put hard-won economic improvements into question.

Another Electoral Disappointment for the Opposition

The major opposition parties once again failed to make any substantial gains in the 10 August presidential elections. Both the CHP and the MHP decided to support a common presidential candidate, who would not necessarily represent the preferences of the core electoral clientele of the two parties but would be in a

position to challenge the dominant position of the AKP. Given the growing alienation of the CHP from the AKP's religious conservative electoral base, pundits remarked that the CHP should make an opening to religious conservative voters through its choice of a presidential candidate with supposedly impeccable Islamic credentials. Ekmeleddin Ihsanoğlu appeared an ideal candidate in that respect, as he originated from a prominent Ottoman family and is one of the most renowned Islamic scholars engaged in inter-civilizational dialogue. He also used to be the Secretary General of the Organization of the Islamic Conference and enjoyed the support of the Erdoğan administration before falling out of favour over his stance on the July 2013 military coup in Egypt. The CHP's agreement with the third biggest political party, the MHP, on jointly nominating Ihsanoğlu was hoped to deliver a message of national unity and boost Ihsanoğlu's election chances against what appeared as a polarizing political campaign on the side of the AKP. Nonetheless, the voters proved insensitive to these qualities. Despite the early surprise and interest that his candidacy generated and his strong Islamist credentials, Ihsanoğlu failed to make inroads into the conservative Muslim electoral clientele that forms the powerbase of the AKP. His campaign was influenced by the political agenda of the coalition parties and did not include any personal elements; hence, it proved rather anaemic and uninspiring. Focusing on issues of social justice and political integrity failed to frame the presidential competition. As a result he could not shed the image of an uncharismatic member of Turkey's upper class who appeared distant and irrelevant to the Turkish citizen. To make things worse, his Islamist credentials backfired within the ranks of opposition party supporters. For many CHP voters and – in particular – those considered as '*ulusalcı*' or neo-nationalist, Ihsanoğlu was too Islamist for their tastes. In addition, they failed to subscribe to the logic of opening up to the conservative segment of Turkish society. While their opposition to the two other presidential candidates, Erdoğan and Demirtaş, may have been stronger for other reasons, the fact that the election date was set in the middle of the summer vacation season had an important consequence. Many members of the secularist middle and upper-middle classes chose not to interrupt their holidays and return to the big city centres to vote. Abstaining from the ballot box thus gave the Erdoğan candidacy crucial leverage.

Equally important was the apparent 'defection' of a sizeable segment of traditional MHP voters from the candidacy of Ihsanoğlu to that of Erdoğan. His populist political message of being one of, and representing, the 'underdogs of Turkish society', and his nationalist projection of Turkey as an 'emerging global power' and 'protector of the powerless and dispossessed' was particularly appealing to them. Erdoğan's election campaign was so much focused on raising nationalist and Islamic sentiment that the Supreme Elections Council had to ban a political advertisement of his due to the explicit use of Islamic and Turkish national symbols. In contrast, Ihsanoğlu appeared too mild, elitist and cosmopolitan for the tastes of the average MHP voter. As a result, while the AKP was able to increase its vote from 17,802,976 in the March 2014 local elections to 21,000,143 votes in the August presidential elections, the two major opposition parties failed to mobilize their voters, despite the highly polarized political environment. While the sum of the

percentages and votes that the CHP and MHP collected in the March 2014 local elections amounted to 42.31 per cent and 18,337,381 votes, their common presidential candidate Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu won only 38.44 per cent, amounting to 15,587,720 votes: that is, approximately 3 million votes less than the combined result of the two opposition parties in the March 2014 local elections. Instead of İhsanoğlu's penetration of the electoral base of the AKP, there was a net loss of votes by the two opposition parties, through either abstention or defection. The turnout of 74.13 per cent – low for Turkish standards – indeed contributed to the election of prime minister Erdoğan in the first round. Had the CHP and the MHP appointed their own separate presidential candidates, it appears very likely that abstention rates among their voters would have been lower, and hence it would not have been possible for prime minister Erdoğan to declare early victory.

The Electoral Success of HDP

The performance of the third candidate, Selahattin Demirtaş, was one of the surprises of the presidential election and deserves further elaboration. Demirtaş led an election campaign which raised many eyebrows. Despite his Kurdish nationalist background, he abstained from exclusively focusing on the Kurdish issue, as many had suspected he would do at the beginning of his campaign. Instead, he raised – alongside the Kurdish question – a set of political issues linked to democratic consolidation, human rights and the rule of law. By doing this, he aimed to represent the concerns of a wider electorate than the Kurdish minority, which included leftists, social democrats and liberals. These used to support the AKP administration when it promoted a bold economic and political reform programme, but distanced themselves when the AKP abandoned its reformist and pro-democracy political agenda. This electoral strategy bore fruit on election day. With 9.76 per cent and 3,958,048 votes, Demirtaş fared better than most pundits had predicted. He collected votes not only in the Kurdish-inhabited provinces of eastern and south-eastern Turkey but also in the big cities, where Turkey's leftists, social democrats and liberals reside.

Another crucial political message that Demirtaş' electoral performance delivered was that the flourishing of the Kurdish political movement does not have to be pursued through bargaining and *de facto* collaboration with the AKP. Following the launch of a 'Kurdish peace process' by the Erdoğan administration, Kurdish political activists in Turkey saw in the person of Erdoğan the leader that could bring about a historic breakthrough in Turkey's Kurdish question. This led to improved relations between the AKP and pro-Kurdish political parties, even though the rule of law and human rights records of the AKP administration were deteriorating. The 9.76 per cent that Demirtaş won showed that it is not impossible for new political parties to get very close to the 10 per cent electoral threshold. The 10 per cent electoral threshold introduced by the 1982 Constitution has been a big obstacle to the renewal of the Turkish political party system. Many ambitious attempts to represent promising social movements failed, as collecting 10 per cent of the vote proved impossible. Demirtaş' 9.76 per cent underlined that it would not be unrealistic for a broad pro-democracy and human rights alliance of Kurdish, social democratic and

liberal political parties to cross the 10 per cent threshold and win parliamentary representation.

Constitutional Reform and Controversy Over the Nature of the Political System

The fulfilment of president Erdoğan's plans for the introduction of a presidential system would require an amendment of the Turkish Constitution. In turn, this would require a two-thirds majority in the 550-seat Turkish Grand National Assembly, in other words 367 votes. Alternatively a constitutional amendment bill collecting 330 votes, that is three-fifths of the Assembly, could be brought to a popular referendum and approved if the voters endorse it. While a constitutional amendment appears at the moment to be a difficult task for the AKP government, what is also possible is a *de facto* transfer of executive powers to the president. This would take place through newly elected president Erdoğan interpreting the constitutional stipulations of his duties in the widest possible sense. President Erdoğan has already declared his intention to represent Turkey at key international summits, and to convene and chair the cabinet. In fact, Erdoğan's choice of a successor to the offices of prime minister and party president was heavily influenced by these intentions. The nomination of Ahmet Davutoğlu as prime minister and president of the AKP showed that personal loyalty and control over the government and party was the prime criterion for Erdoğan's choice. Davutoğlu's 'impeccable stance' during the corruption crisis – what Erdoğan prefers to call 'struggle with the "parallel state"' – was the main reason for his decision. His choice was also influenced to the evaluation that he would not pose any obstacle to the *de facto* introduction of a presidential system.

While it is uncertain that the constitutional amendment desired by Erdoğan will materialize, it is expected that he will claim a much stronger role than his predecessors in shaping key policy areas. The Kurdish issue, foreign policy, in particular Turkey's involvement in the Middle East, and major construction projects are all issues that Erdoğan could claim to belong within his own sphere of competence. The upcoming parliamentary elections, which will take place in June 2015 at the latest, will prove to be a milestone regarding Erdoğan's ability to consolidate his hegemonic position in Turkish politics. An even broader parliamentary majority paving the way to a constitutional amendment according to his desires would be tantamount to the culmination of the 10 August 2014 electoral victory. As much as it would contradict constitutional stipulations about the non-partisan and impartial character of the President's office, a strong personal involvement of Erdoğan in this parliamentary election campaign in support of prime minister Davutoğlu and the AKP are highly likely.

Funding

This work was supported by the Jean Monnet Chair Programme of the European Commission and the BAGEP Programme of Bilim Akademisi-The Science Academy, Turkey.